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The English Garden at Chantilly.

President's perspective – plants, people and places

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If there is one plant which is guaranteed to catch the eye of visitors to our home in the often dim light of January it is *Skimmia japonica* 'Magic Marlot' (fig 1). This dwarf, hardy, evergreen shrub has lived in its green-glazed container on our doorstep for several years now and never fails to please. Indeed, it answers most if not all the requirements of some gardeners for a shrub for today's smaller,

urban gardens, especially those where soil-space is limited if not absent, and it is shade tolerant too. Of relatively slow growth, it forms a rounded, compact hummock or mound (mine is 25 x 45cm after 10 years), clothed with the neatest of leaves to 5cm long, narrow and pointed. These are two-tone green with a distinct creamy-white margin. The fragrant terminal flower clusters open white with

yellow anthers in April, but they are present throughout winter as jewel-like clusters of red buds contrasting strikingly with the foliage. This is a male form and bears no berries.

Not content with the *Skimmia*, opposite our door in a narrow border I grow another small, variegated evergreen shrub, *Daphne odora* 'Rebecca' (fig. 2). Ultimately larger than the *Skimmia* and less compact,



Fig. 1 *Skimmia japonica* 'Magic Marlot'.

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Fig 2 *Daphne odora* 'Rebecca'.

it is nevertheless what I call a cracker of a plant with larger, longer, green leaves, boldly margined creamy yellow. It flowers with me any time from January or February, later in a cold winter; the loose clusters of pale lilac flowers are rose-purple in bud and on the outside, and richly fragrant. This daphne too can be grown in a container if necessary, and I find it a much brighter, more reliable cultivar than the more commonly grown 'Aureomarginata'. While on the subject of daphnes, in February, while visiting Wisley I observed a group of *D. bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' in full flower. It was a mild sunny day and the flowers were attracting bees and three Red Admirals. I cannot remember having seen butterflies of any kind visiting this daphne before.

Later that month I answered a knock on our door to find our old friend John Massey broadly smiling and holding a bottle of wine and a tray with four beautiful yellow-flowered hellebores (fig. 3). He was staying the night with us and giving one of his inimitable talks locally the next day. The wine was to celebrate the recent birth of our first grandchildren, a pigeon pair. John's talk on hepaticas was a tour de force with superb images and an enchanting musical score. Such occasions are to be cherished.

In March, Sue and I attended the HPS AGM and Lecture Day organised by the Nottingham Group and it was well worth the drive, with lectures by John Grimshaw and Bleddyn Wynn-Jones filling our heads with images of rare and must-have plants

and our notebooks with hard-earned expertise and valued opinions. As always on these occasions, we benefited enormously from the opportunity to meet and share with members our own experiences and anecdotes. The whole day was well organised and a triumph, so congratulations to everyone involved including, of course, the exhibitors in the foyer.

April as usual opened the floral floodgates, and yet again I was forced to abandon my attempts to keep a written monthly record of all the plants flowering in my garden. Among the prettiest is a single, creamy-white-flowered form of the well-known *Kerria japonica* named 'Albescens' (fig. 4). Tough and hardy and totally reliable, it brings an element of wild charm to the garden with its thin, slender pea-green shoots and its graceful bridal-wreath display. It makes a loose, deciduous shrub to 1.5m and it pays to remove the flowering shoots from the base once they have faded, to encourage a good display the following year. Flowering sprays, when cut, provide an elegant if short-lived display indoors. My plant was a gift from a Japanese friend and I shall always be grateful to him.

I visited my old friend Peter Catt at Liss Forest Nursery near Petersfield at the end of April.

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Fig. 3 Our old friend John Massey arrives to wet our grandchildren's heads.

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Fig. 4 *Kerria japonica* 'Albescens'.

He had recently injured himself falling off a ladder and was in some pain, but he ignored the discomfort to show me around his own plantsman's garden. I can always find something new when I visit, and on this occasion it was an attractive rose-pink-flowered *Primula kisoana* from Japan which he generously shared with me. Nearby was a most striking herbaceous peony, *Paeonia kavachensis* (fig. 5), which is regarded by some authorities as a form of *P. mascula*; but Peter's plant looked quite distinct in its combination of reddish-magenta, golden-anthered flowers and its young leaves, plum-purple and bloomy above, maturing a dark bloomy green. I was quite taken with this plant, whose beauty and sense of mystery was heightened by

a shaft of sunlight through the trees. Peter also showed me a lovely form of the American Snowdrop tree, *Halesia carolina* Monticola Group, which instead of the normal white has flowers of a most delicate pink (fig. 6). Its name was 'Arnold Pink' but I have yet to find a commercial source of supply.

In my own garden, in May *Epimedium qingchengshanense* and *E. leigongense* (now *E. pseudowushanense*), both Ogisu collections from China, were in flower. Both are worth growing for flower and foliage, but why oh why such cumbersome names? I can hear them being pronounced by a Chinese botanist but in the Anglo-Saxon tongue I think not. Another of Ogisu's

Chinese introductions, a tree peony, was flowering in a border close by. I originally received it under the name *P. szechuanica*, referring to its native province of Sichuan. It was too simple a name to last, and soon enough I heard it had been changed to *P. decomposita* (fig. 7) meaning deeply divided, referring to the leaf. Despite the inference of the name in English it is a handsome species with its distinct foliage and puce-pink blooms. With me it has reached a height of 1.7m.

In June my garden plant of the month was a scentless honeysuckle *Lonicera* 'Mandarin' (fig. 8), a hybrid (*L. x brownii* 'Dropmore Scarlet' x *L. tragophylla*) raised in Vancouver. It was growing trained to a tripod support in the new



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Fig. 5 *Paeonia kavachensis*.

Fig. 6 Peter Catt with *Halesia carolina* Monticola Group 'Arnold Pink' at Liss Forest Nursery.

Centenary Border at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and caught visitors' eyes with its superb orange flower clusters set in bold, saucer-shaped, green bracts. Few more exotic-looking flowers from a hardy plant it would be hard to imagine. I immediately acquired one for my own garden.

A couple of years ago I saw for the first time, growing in a Cornish garden, the original *Gunnera*, that is the South African species which became the original (type) species. It is named *Gunnera perpensa* (fig. 9) and is much smaller and smoother than the giant prickly-leaved American species *G. manicata* and *G. tinctoria* commonly planted by lakes and streams in larger estates and gardens. *G. perpensa* is small enough (up to 1m)

to grow in a large pot, as I do, placed in a shallow dish or similar container of water which I can easily top up during warm periods. I have it on our patio during summer, enjoying its long-stalked rounded or kidney-shaped leaves. The long, thin, reddish flower spikes have yet to appear on my plant. As the weather grows colder and the leaves begin to fade and die, I place it in a sheltered site to protect its rootstock against freezing or it can stand beneath a greenhouse bench for the duration. In a sheltered garden in the milder areas of Britain it might survive planting in the muddy margin of a pond.

I have several times in these articles mentioned the Courson Flower Show, held twice a year in May and

October in the grounds of the Chateau de Courson to the south of Paris. October 2014 saw the last of these occasions in its original home, and in May last year I joined my fellow judges at its new home in the 'English Garden' at the Domaine de Chantilly (fig. 10). While we judges were sad to leave the Courson site, which had become a home from home in the 25-plus years some of us have been attending, we quite understood the need to move to a bigger location, given the increasing popularity of what is now France's oldest and greatest flower show. Despite our fears that it might not easily adapt to its new surroundings, we were delighted, after two shows, to see how well it settled in and was accepted by visitors both old and new.

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Fig. 7 *Paeonia decomposita*.

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Fig. 8 *Lonicera* 'Mandarin' in the new Centenary Border at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.

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Fig. 9 *Gunnera perpensa*.

From a British visitor's perspective the new location is far more easily accessed, as it is to the north of Paris which means navigation of the dreaded peripherique is now a thing of the past.

Despite the odd shower both exhibitors and visitors were back in strength at the May show, and from a plantsman's point of view the plants for sale, both perennials and woody, were as plentiful as ever, if not more so, and just as exciting and tempting. In its early years I found few plants at Courson which were not available at British flower shows but all that has changed, and now I never seem to have enough funds or car space to buy the

many plants I desire; indeed, I always seem to be bringing them home for fellow judges who have travelled by train or plane. As it is, I brought home *Euonymus cornutus* with its pendulous pink and orange fruits like jester's caps in autumn, and a startlingly variegated fern, *Coniogramme emeiensis*. From the October show I returned with *Fuchsia magellanica* var. *eburnea* (fig. 11), like a miniature 'Lady Bacon', and x *Mukgenia* 'Flame' (fig. 12), a curious hybrid raised and marketed by Terra Nova nurseries in the USA. Between a *Mukdenia* and a *Bergenia*, it has jaggedly toothed, green fleshy foliage which turns deep red in

autumn before dying back. It will be available here in the UK this year.

One of my favourite countries, for its people, its wild places, its gardens and gardeners is Ireland. Since my first visit in the 1960s I have returned to this wonderful and wet island almost every year. Last year I was there again in August, visiting the late Corona North's garden and farm at Altamont in Co. Carlow (fig. 13). Her plantsmanship was legendary, as was her hospitality. On a previous visit many years ago I had arrived at the house to find a broad band of yellow *Sternbergia lutea* stretching either side of her gate.



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Fig. 10 Judges meet at Chantilly, the new site for Courson Flower Show.

We were joined by other guests and come lunch time we were invited to sit around a large solid table for a meal she had prepared. First, she served a delicious pea soup, and then the main course. At this point, our hostess excused herself as she had something she needed to attend to. "I shall be back in time for your pudding" she explained, and with a smile she was gone. True to her word, we had just finished our meal when she reappeared with our pudding, something with lashings of hot custard which I can never resist, followed by coffee or tea. It was only later that I heard she had been called away to help one of her heavily pregnant cows give birth! She was one of the garden world's special characters, a delight to have met. Sadly, the house is now empty though her garden

continues under the care of her Head Gardener Paul Cutler and his staff. Part of the walled garden is now a rather exciting plant centre whose enthusiastic and knowledgeable owner Robert Miller has stocked with woody and herbaceous plants, many of which are not easily available elsewhere in Ireland.

On this trip I visited other gardens, including one new to me, June Blake's garden at Tinade, Co. Wicklow, where she grows a huge variety of hardy perennials artistically in raised borders and beds (fig. 14). A delightful lady, of slender build and a welcoming manner, wearing jeans with a belt and holster for her secateurs, she took Sue and me on a delightful tour, explaining how it all began and pointing out her special plants, most of which were in flower. Of the many that caught my attention I

must mention *Thalictrum delavayi* 'Splendide'; *Geranium psilostemon* 'Mount Venus' (fig. 15), a superb cultivar, new to me and one I am determined to have; and *rodgersias* aplenty, planted in bold groups and drifts. The garden is a must for all hardy planters and if you do visit, be sure and ask June the directions to her brother Jimmy's garden over the hill where another pleasant surprise awaits.

What I believe to be the best illustrated book yet on its subject, *The Irish Garden* by Jane Powers, was published last year by Francis Lincoln Ltd. Whether you buy it or borrow it, do not attempt an Irish garden tour without consulting it first.

While on holiday with my wife and friends in the Jutland area of Denmark in September, we came upon a wonderful bog full of berries. There were whinberries, bog whortleberries, cranberries and crowberries. What made it even more special, however, were the beautiful sky-blue flowers of marsh gentian, *Gentiana pneumonanthe*, scattered among them. Elsewhere there was Grass of Parnassus, *Parnassia palustris*, and in nearby dunes stout clumps of *Sedum telephium* ssp. *maximum* with dense heads of greenish-cream flowers.

And so to the year's end, when a count of plants flowering in our garden on Christmas Day numbered close on 50 species and

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Fig. 11 *Fuchsia magellanica* var. *eburnea*.

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Fig. 12 x *Mukdenia* 'Flame'.



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Fig. 13 Altamont in Co. Carlow.

cultivars outstanding among which were *Camellia* 'Inspiration', x *Rhaphiobotrya* 'Coppertone', *Grevillea* 'Jean O'Neil', *Primula vulgaris*, *Ageratina ligustrina*, *Leucosium aestivum*, the so-called Summer snowflake, and a great many hellebores

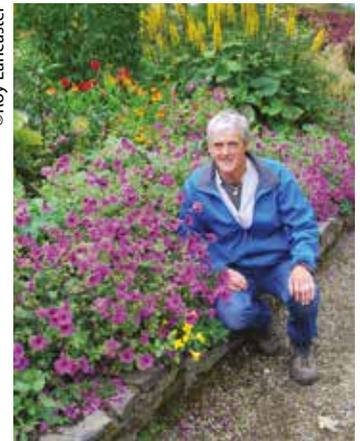
and snowdrops. Despite the rain, monsoonal at times, the regular branch-snapping winds and one night of serious sub-zero temperatures, our garden this winter has never seen so many different plants in flower. Our pleasure,

however, is tempered by thoughts of those of our members who have really suffered as a result of the deluge and I am not thinking just about their gardens. I can only wish that 2016 will bring hope and happiness in equal measure. 🌸



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Fig. 14 June Blake's garden at Tinade, Co. Wicklow, where she grows a huge variety of hardy perennials artistically in raised borders and beds.



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Fig. 15 June with *Geranium psilostemon* 'Mount Venus', an excellent new cultivar.